Introduction: The Expanding Past

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In 1980, Mary Douglas brought out the first English version of Collective Memory, a series of papers that Maurice Halbwachs' admirers had published in France thirty years earlier. Douglas's book on Halbwachs is intrinsically important, but it also stands as a marker—a convenient and easily remembered way to date the start of a great wave of collective memory research that is bound to swell beyond the turn of the twenty-first century. Qualitative Sociology brings to this development seven new studies. Each study extends, in its own way, a vital tradition of sociological inquiry.

I

The sociology of memory has an uneven history. Charles Horton Cooley (1918) and George Herbert Mead (1929, 1932) were the first Americans to explore the social context of memory, but their efforts never gelled into a coherent perspective. It was the French school of Emile Durkheim that made memory an object of systematic inquiry. Durkheim's own interest in the past as a "social fact" goes back to his and Marcel Mauss's (1903) treatment of ancient Chinese time reckoning (Primitive Classification [1903] 1963). In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life ([1915] 1965), Durkheim's interest shifted from the social context of time classifications to commemoration rites as binders of present and past.

Stefan Czarnowski's The Cult of Heroes and Its Social Conditions (1919), an analysis of religious rituals and festivals devoted to Saint Patrick, was the first monograph to enlarge Durkheim's understanding of the social framework of commemoration. Czarnowski's efforts, however, were too specialized to be appreciated outside a small circle of religion scholars. The
work of another Durkheim student, Maurice Halbwachs, has been passed
down to us while Czarnowski's efforts, despite their considerable relevance
and merit, have been forgotten.

Halbwachs, an intense scholar with wide-ranging interests, was im-
pressed less by Durkheim's treatment of commemoration rites than by his
analysis of the social origins of the categories of thought. In this analysis
Halbwachs found analytic tools to connect his interest in the phenomenol-
ogy of memory (going back to his days as Henri Bergson's student) to his
more recently formed interests in social institutions and social structures.
The result: Halbwachs' classic *The Social Frames of Memory* (1925 [1952]).
Land* (1941), considers the location of events connected with the life of
Christ and demonstrates how the assumed origin of Christianity shifted ac-
cording to the new religion's doctrinal concerns and the changing geopo-
assembled during the late 1940s, consists of programmatic essays written
during the 1920s and 1930s and covers a wide range of issues, including
the relationship between "collective memory" and "historical memory."

Between 1945, the year Halbwachs was executed by the Gestapo, and
the early 1980s, his work was ignored by most Americans. Lloyd Warner
wrote extensively about collective memory in *The Living and the Dead*
(1959), but he never mentioned Halbwachs. After 1980, however,
Halbwachs' name became widely known and cited, even though his two
major books, *The Social Frames of Memory* and *The Legendary Topography
of the Gospels*, have never been translated into English. (Lewis Coser's
[1992] selections and translations from Halbwachs' collected works did not
appear until 1991.) Thus, Halbwachs' discoveries did not cause the present
current of collective memory research; they were rather swept into it.

II

While Maurice Halbwachs was in France writing about collective mem-
ory, Karl Mannheim was in Germany writing about the sociology of knowl-
edge. Both men were affected by the jaded intellectual climate resulting
from the First World War's destructiveness. Thirteen million dead—never
before had Europe known anything like it. "What nobody would have
thought possible suddenly turned out to be real; what everyone had taken
to be reality itself now stood revealed as an illusion." So wrote Paul Kec-
skemeti (1952) about the environment in which Europe's postwar intellec-
tuals found themselves. What lead to the devastation and upheaval? The
answering of this critical question required a complete reexamination of all traditional ideas about society and its past.

Mannheim believed that rapid, unsettling changes in political and economic structures "makes possible the insight, hidden until now by a generally stable social structure and the practicability of certain traditional norms, that every point of view [including points of view about the past] is particular to a social situation" (1936, pp. 84-85). In such environments, Robert Merton later observed, shared orientations diminish and are overshadowed by a socially patterned cynicism wherein "one universe of discourse challenges all others and statements and truth claims are assessed in terms of the social interests of those who produced them." A branch of the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of memory "thrives in a society where large groups of people have already become alienated from common values; where separate universes of discourse are linked with reciprocal distrust." Thus, the sociology of memory, like the sociology of knowledge, "systematizes the lack of faith in reigning symbols" (Merton 1957:459).

Still an object of distrust and struggle, the past is widely conceived as a mask concealing the interests of the powerful, yet, these conceptions have new meanings because they are part of a new cultural environment. The 1960s and 1970s were years of disillusionment resembling those through which Europe passed in the 1920s. It was a twilight era in which processes of disintegration were more visible than processes of growth; disagreement more visible than harmony; change more visible than stability. It was the decade in which "conflict theories" of social order replaced "consensus theories," the decade in which all certified accounts of the past, as of everything else, were repudiated.

The eldest of the present generation of collective memory scholars were students during the 1960s and 1970s; their recent work, an echo of its intellectual culture. Unlike physical echoes that grow weaker as they reverberate, intellectual echoes amplify the sounds of the earlier day. Three overlapping intellectual perspectives—multiculturalism, postmodernism, and hegemony theory—articulate the connection between the 1960s-1970s cultural revolution and contemporary interest in the construction of the past. Not everyone conducting collective memory research identifies with these perspectives; many scholars reject them, but all find themselves addressing the issues they raise. Multiculturalists conceive Middle America's historical vision as a support for its cultural dominance and a standard that marginalizes women and minorities. (For a representative statement, see Kaye 1991.) Postmodernists feed the multicultural program by celebrating the "petit narratives" of minorities who would be otherwise deleted from history and by deconstructing the "grand narratives" that answer ultimate questions about the dominant culture's origin, purpose, and fate (Lyotard
1979, pp. xxiv, 14, 37). Hegemony scholars, too, treat memory as a contested object of differently empowered communities, but their interests are class-based. They see the politics of memory reconciling the masses to elite claims and privileges. (See, for example, Hobsbawm 1983; Alonso 1988; Bodnar 1992.)

As multiculturalism, postmodernism, and hegemony theory define the late twentieth-century intellectual environment, they shape the terms in which we debate collective memory. Whether collective memory is a constructed or retrieved reality, contested or shared, rooted in historical knowledge or commemorative symbolism, revised or unchanged as one generation replaces the next, a mirror that reflects the concerns of society or a lamp of practical guidance and moral precedent—these issues do not exhaust the dimensions of the existing literature, but readers will find them arising time and again as they move through the present inquiries.

III

Eviatar Zerubavel’s “Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past” provides a good point of departure, for its premise is that we remember not as individuals but as members of local and national communities. “Mnemonic communities,” in his words, maintain “mnemonic traditions,” teach new generations what to remember and forget through “mnemonic socialization,” the monitoring of “mnemonic others,” and the fighting of “mnemonic battles.” Thus, remembering comes into view as a control system. On one level, what we remember of our own past is determined by what parents and elders tell us about it. On another, deeper, level, we identify ourselves with the enduring memories of our communities. As communal boundaries become coextensive with shared memories, we feel pride or shame in past events that happened even before we were born.

The first issue running through Zerubavel’s essay concerns the dynamics of memory: who gets remembered and how? The second issue concerns resource and interest structures: the why of collective memory. Each contributor addresses these points in one way or another; each emphasizes one point more than the other. For Robin Wagner-Pacifici, genre is the essential element for understanding the “who” and “how” of remembrance. About any mnemonic symbol three questions must be asked: Is it conventional or anomalous? Is it meant to be permanent or temporary? Is it an appropriate or inappropriate vehicle for sustaining memory? Wagner-Pacifici’s “Memories in the Making: The Shapes of Things That Went” answers these questions through a typology of remembrance and commemoration.
Some forms, like the Iwo Jima statue, are conventional, permanent, and appropriate; others, like World War II posters, are conventional and appropriate, but designed to be discarded when they have served their purpose. Wagner-Pacifici, however, focuses on two "breakaway genres" of uncertain appropriateness: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a biographical remembrance of the Holocaust, and the Unified Olympic Team of the old Soviet republics, an alliance in search of a past. Just as Spiegelman used a cartoon format to preserve weighty memories of the Holocaust, the 1992 Unified Team used new symbols to preserve memories of the old Soviet team. For the most part, the Unified Team was the old Soviet team, but dressed in different uniforms—just as different nationalities in *Maus* appear as different animals. Combining appreciation of the genres in which Holocaust and Olympic memories are encased with a recognition of the realities they represent, Wagner-Pacifici detects the mutability of the past without defining it a mere "reflection" of current concerns and interests.

Gladys and Kurt Lang, like Wagner-Pacifici, are interested in what gets preserved and how. Their emphasis, however, is not on genre but on artistic reputation and the social dynamics that destroy and preserve it. In "Banishing the Past: The German Avant-Garde and Nazi Art," the Langs show artistic careers colliding with history. Their case begins with the 1938 Nazi confiscation of "degenerate" artworks. It is a paradoxical case, for the regime never destroyed a work it could sell, and the works most likely to be sold were produced by the most renowned artists. The Nazi's most hated targets, as it turned out, were the artists most likely to profit by the sympathy their persecution aroused. Artists who had failed to make a name for themselves, on the other hand, were likely to lose what little reputation they had. Unsold, their confiscated paintings were put to the torch. That Allied treatment of Nazi-connected art work followed a similar pattern calls to mind the "Matthew Principle": the more reputation an artist has at the time of his persecution, the more renown will he receive because of it.

Robert Belli and Howard Schuman's research note on "The Complexity of Ignorance" approaches the *what* and *how* of memory by examining the nature of scoring "errors" in a survey of public knowledge of celebrities and historical figures. Respondents' answers sometimes transcended scorers' knowledge. Joseph McCarthy was the New York Yankees "Bronx Bomber" manager and member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, but scorers had never heard of him. For them, the only "valid" Joseph McCarthy was the Wisconsin Senator. Most of the time, respondent errors resulted from their own ignorance. As ignorance is alloyed with knowledge, however, errors assume definite patterns. "Name association" (Joseph [instead of Jack] McCarthy is a Detroit television newscaster), "inversion" ("Joseph McCarthy was a communist agent [instead of communist hunter]") and
"temporal displacements" ("Joseph [instead of Eugene] McCarthy ran for the presidency in 1968") reflect powerful dynamics—cognitive dynamics—that mediate the historical record.

Cognition is always context dependent—which leads to the next theme, the why of remembering and forgetting. Moving through Diane Barthel's essay on the social organization of historic preservation, Shaunna Scott's analysis of Harlan, Kentucky's Miners Memorial, and Barry Schwartz's account of the Gettysburg Address's changing meaning, we move through organizations, communities, and generations as contexts of remembrance.

In "Getting in Touch with History: The Role of Historic Preservation in Shaping Collective Memories," Diane Barthel demonstrates why preserved objects cannot represent the past as it was. Objects must be always selected from a larger array and the use to which preservationists put them depends on their purposes and interests (profit vs. non-profit; education vs. entertainment) and on the material qualities of the objects themselves (mine shaft vs. medicine cabinet). Selection and recontextualization are themselves aspects of a pre-given interpretation of the past. The "heroic" school of interpretation, for example, emphasizes the achievements of inventors and entrepreneurs; New History, the role of anonymous labor. Yet, selection is not to be confused with distortion. As every act of preservation is selective, it reveals a portion of the past that cannot be known in any other way.

Museums are organizational arenas in which competing ideas of nation and community are mobilized. Shaunna Scott's "Dead Work: The Construction and Reconstruction of the Harlan Miners Memorial" also treats memory as a contested object, but the merit of her essay is to clarify the limits within which the conflict works itself out. Consensus was evident in the enthusiasm with which all strata of the Harlan community, from professionals to unskilled laborers, supported the Miners Memorial. Conflict was evident in the fear of offending mine operators by saying anything about labor unions and the decision to omit the names of anyone killed in the earlier years of labor-operator violence. The most dramatic part of the story, however, is the municipal authorities' removal of the original monument and substitution of another—along with a plaque that effectively wipes out the memory of the original's sponsors. What began as a grass roots memorial becomes a gift bestowed by a beneficent elite. Yet, even the elite were not free to conceive the past as they wished. They could replace one version of the past for another, but not erase it. The politics of memory always take place within a community of memory that limits the extent to which particular interests can be pursued.

Finally, Barry Schwartz's "Rereading the Gettysburg Address: Social Change and Collective Memory" illuminates the generational contexts of
commemoration. When delivered in 1863, Lincoln’s Address was widely understood as a call to defeat the enemy and finish the war. In the early twentieth-century, it became the credo of a democracy defined in terms of Progressive reforms, competitive individualism, and racial segregation. Not until civil rights conflicts peaked in the early 1960s did the Gettysburg Address become a credo of racial justice. Beyond the “postmodern turn” of the 1960s, an expanding culture of equality eroded authority and caused Lincoln’s prestige to fall dramatically. That his Address remains a powerful symbol of equality raises the issue of the postmodern “death of the author.” Lincoln, ironically, was reduced by the power of the egalitarian ideal he symbolized—even as that ideal became embodied in his own words.

IV

Knowledge of collective memory grows in spurts—a brace of writings in Europe and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, then a period of quiet, then an eruption of theorizing and research during the last two decades of the century. The work forms, breaks up into a series of what seem to be disconnected inquiries, then tentatively reconnects. Thus, our knowledge is chronically incomplete. Progress is made, in Clifford Geertz’s words, “less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate” (1973:29). What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.

The present issue of Qualitative Sociology has extended and refined the debate, shaken the art loose from its earlier state, vexed its readers with new facts and viewpoints. It has widened the perimeter of understanding. Memory as a system of social attachment and social control, the problematic fit between commemorative genres and historical events, the self-preserving functions of reputation, the cognitive dynamics of distortion, the link between preservation and distortions of the past, the interplay of consensus and conflict in commemorative enterprise, the detachment of historical texts from their authors—these matters now vex us with more precision, now widen and deepen our debates.

REFERENCES


